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WHAT EUROPE OWES TO BELGIUM

BY

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WHAT EUROPE OWES TO BELGIUM[1]

JUST over a hundred years ago, at the end of 1813, the allied armies of Austria, Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain were closing in upon France to dethrone Napoleon. One of the successes which were gained by the Prussians on the road to France was the expulsion from Belgium of the French, who had held the country since 1795. For eighteen years Belgium had been treated as an integral part of France ; in fact it had been organized as nine French departments. A minor problem which had to be settled after Napoleon's deposition was the future ownership of this country ; the Congress of Vienna handed it over to the kingdom of the Netherlands. No one imagined at the time that the Belgian people might object to this arrangement. Indeed, it was supposed that they would welcome union with the Dutch. For the State so formed would certainly be powerful enough for self-defence—whereas Belgium had been singularly defenceless in the past—and further, it was certain to become exceedingly prosperous, because it would control the lower part of the Rhine and the Meuse valleys, and would naturally be the main outlet for the foreign trade of Western Germany. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the Great Powers paid much attention to Belgian susceptibilities. What they desired, in their own interest, not in that of the Belgians or the Dutch, was to create a kingdom which would serve as

[1] A lecture delivered at Birmingham to the Workers' Educational Association on November 25, 1914.

a buffer between France and Germany, and which would be strong enough to keep Antwerp and Amsterdam from falling into the hands of a first-class State, such as France or Prussia. And in justice to the Great Powers it must be said that no one of them got any direct advantage from the union of the Dutch and the Belgians. Austria, who ranked as the second of the Great Powers —though she would not have admitted that she was only the second—gave up a good deal by assenting to the union. Legally she had the best claim to Belgium, which had belonged to her, under the name of the Austrian Netherlands, for eighty-two years before the French conquest. Austria had acquired her right, by the consent of the Great Powers, at the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

But though the treatment of Belgium in 1815 was not conspicuously selfish—the interests of Belgium were only subordinated to the general interests of Europe—the Great Powers showed a blindness to the lessons of past history which is certainly surprising.

They might be excused for supposing that the Belgians did not greatly desire independence. It is true the Belgians had disliked the rule of the Jacobins and of Napoleon; they had fought against Napoleon at Waterloo. Before that they had rebelled against Austrian rule, and had proclaimed themselves a republic (1789). But in each case they had risen simply to defend the ancient laws and privileges of their provinces and cities; and past experience seemed to show that they had no objection to a foreign ruler who allowed them to manage their local affairs in their own way. Before they came under Austria they had been ruled by the Spanish Hapsburgs for two hundred years; and before that by a French dynasty, the Dukes of Burgundy. In the remote past the provinces of Belgium had been little feudal princi-

palities; Ghent and Mons and Louvain, Liège and Namur, had been the capital cities of counts and dukes who were practically independent. But there had never been a Belgian national State. The very name of Belgium was an invention of the antiquarians: in the time of Julius Caesar the Celtic tribes of the Netherlands were federated under the name of Belgae. But the Belgium of modern history contains two distinct races; and though the Walloons in the southern provinces were and are Celts, the Flemings in the north are undeniably Teutons in physique, in language, and in manners.

All these facts seemed so many reasons to justify the action of the Congress of Vienna. But, on the other hand, it should have been clear that the Dutch were the last nationality with whom the Belgians would consent to amalgamate. In the sixteenth century, for just twelve years (1567–79), the two peoples had united to throw off what seemed to them the intolerable yoke of Spain. But, after twelve years of the alliance, the Belgians had decided that, great as were the wrongs which they had suffered from Spain, it was better to be ruled by Spain than to run the risk of being ruled by the Dutch. They found the Dutch too imperious; they felt that, to maintain the alliance, it would be necessary to give way to the Dutch on every point of difference. And the points of difference were serious. The Dutch were Protestants, while the larger half of Belgium has always been devoted to the old faith. The Dutch were democratic and radical in politics, while the Belgians were strongly conservative and inclined to aristocratic government. The Dutch were a commercial race, who made no secret of their jealousy for the prosperous Belgian trading towns. Finally, the

Dutch were a seafaring race, inclined to risk everything for the sake of colonies and a carrying trade; but the Belgians were a sedentary folk, given over to agriculture and industrialism, with no interest at all in sea-power.

Such had been the causes of difference in 1579; and substantially the same causes produced civil war in the kingdom of the United Netherlands only fifteen years after it had been created. The population of Holland was considerably smaller than that of Belgium; but the king was a Dutchman; the Dutch usually contrived to make a majority in the national parliament; and the ministers of the crown were chosen by the king from his own countrymen. Both the bad and the good measures of this Government were displeasing to the Belgians; they were indignant at its attempts to make Dutch the official language, and also at its adoption of a policy of complete religious tolerance. They found that the Dutch system of taxation was so contrived as to bear hardly on the Belgian provinces; and they grumbled because their clergy were compelled to go through a course of higher education.

Civil war broke out in 1830; the Belgians were badly beaten by the Dutch, but saved from subjugation through the interference of France and England. The Great Powers decided to set up an independent Belgian State (1831), and after eight years the Dutch consented to recognize this arrangement (Treaty of London, 1839). The Belgians were obliged to compensate the Dutch by ceding territory on the eastern frontier, which was and is inhabited by a Flemish population. That is how Maestricht comes to be a Dutch possession at the present day. But the Belgians may now console themselves by reflecting that the Dutch occupation of Maestricht has

been a most useful check upon the German invaders of Belgium in the present war.

The Great Powers, then, in 1839, made amends to Belgium for the injury which had been inflicted in 1815. But, in doing so, they raised again a question which they had hoped to settle for good and all at Vienna. Obviously the new kingdom of the Belgians was not strong enough to defend Antwerp against France or against Prussia. If left to themselves, the Belgians would in common prudence accept the protection of one of these two Powers, probably of France; and then would be revived the danger of a French naval base at Antwerp, which had driven England to war with France in 1793. So it was agreed to make Belgium a neutral State in perpetuity. This plan had already been adopted, in regard to Switzerland, at the Congress of Vienna. It conferred a great advantage on Belgium; for it made any invasion of her territory a breach of international law. But it also restrained her freedom of action. She could not go to war except in self-defence; nor might she make any treaty which was not obviously and entirely defensive. She could not even go to war to defend an ally; and this, in effect, meant that she would never be able to make an alliance upon equal terms. All the Powers who signed the Treaty of London were equally bound to protect her; but she could hardly make further provisions for her safety by private treaties. You will remember that the Germans, quite recently, have gone so far as to argue that, if Belgium has at any time in the past made arrangements with France or with England for her own defence, those arrangements amount to a breach of neutrality. The argument is not one which international lawyers would accept; but, as a matter of fact, it is very hard to

frame a treaty, or even an agreement of a less formal kind, between two nations in such a way that it cannot possibly be construed as offensive in its purpose.

Here, then, we come to the legal obligations by which Europe is bound to Belgium. The Great Powers, for their own security, insisted upon partially disarming Belgium. By way of compensation they promised to defend the independence of Belgium. They are bound to fulfil this obligation, and not only as a matter of their national honour—though it will be a bad day for Europe when nations cease to think that they are bound in honour to fulfil their pledges, or to think that their honour is worth no considerable sacrifices. They are bound by their plain interests. For if they betray such pledges, how can they hope to make firm friends in the future? If they desert the small States who trust in them, how can they expect loyal dealings from allies who are not afraid of them?

German writers and statesmen sometimes make light of international law, as though it consisted entirely of rules which had been made by weak States, such as Belgium and Switzerland, to tie the hands of their more powerful neighbours. One may freely admit that many text-books of international law have been written by lawyers who belong to the smaller nationalities; and it is true that some of these books lay down doctrines which have no claim to be regarded as law, though the weaker States hope that they may be so regarded. But there is a great deal of international law which is formally recognized as binding by all the civilized States of the world. For example, there are general rules relating to the rights and duties of neutral States in war-time. These are embodied in the Hague Convention of 1907, which was ratified by all the Powers.

Then there are the more special rights and obligations of particular Powers one to another, which are defined in the treaties concluded at various times between them—as, for instance, the treaties which France and Germany concluded with Great Britain in 1870, treaties by which these two States promised to respect the neutrality of Belgium. It is the general belief, not simply of theorists and philanthropists, but of the practical statesmen of the world, that if such conventions and treaties may be repudiated with impunity by any Power which, after signing them, finds them inconvenient, if diplomacy may decline to recognize any Right but that of the strong to take what they covet, then the inevitable result will be a frightful anarchy, a ceaseless warfare of all States against all. The race of armaments will become increasingly acute, the best energies of every nation will be perforce devoted to no other tasks but that of self-defence, and the end of this insane rivalry will be either the bankruptcy of all the rivals, or a world-wide despotism of one.

These are the issues at stake in the present war. The central fact of the situation is that, in attacking Belgium, the Germans have proclaimed their contempt for international law and for the ideals which have given birth to that law. The Germans have indeed attempted to prove that Belgium forfeited her rights of neutrality before they attacked her ; but these attempts have been singularly unsuccessful, for the simple reason that they had no foundation in fact. Only four days before attacking Belgium they assured the Belgian Government that they intended to respect Belgian neutrality ; and a few days after German troops had entered Belgium the German Chancellor told the Reichstag that the German Government had committed

a breach of international law, because 'necessity knows no law'. Unquestionably he was more prudent than those of his countrymen who deny that any nation is bound by its plighted word; but if promises can be repudiated at any moment on the unproved plea of necessity, international law is reduced to a sham. Englishmen felt, and felt rightly, when they heard of the German invasion of Belgium, that the German Empire is the deadliest peril which has menaced Europe since the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte. Unless we defended Belgium, all European treaties might as well be torn up. We have a longer political experience than the German Empire; we know that neither we nor any other nation can exist without firm alliances and honourable understandings. And we have gone to war mainly for the purpose of convincing Germany that treaties and guarantees are something more than 'scraps of paper'.

What we have done for Belgium is no more than we should be bound, in honour and in interest, to do for any Power to which we had given such guarantees of whole-hearted and individual support. And one must confess with very genuine shame that our support has been far from adequate to the danger in which Belgium was involved. We have made great efforts, and we have every cause to be proud of the gallantry with which our soldiers are fighting on the flank of the Belgian army at the present moment. Our soldiers have done more than any foreign nation ever expected of them—more than we had any right to expect, however much we hoped of them. But, for all that, the Belgian army is to-day all but driven out of Belgium; some of the most renowned of Belgian cities are in ruins; at least half the Belgian people are either starving or dependent

upon foreign charity in foreign lands. We hope and believe that this calamitous state of things will soon be bettered. But we know only too well that we can never restore to the Belgians the best of their lost possessions—her fallen soldiers, and, still more pitiful, the martyrs of Termonde, of Dinant, of Louvain.

I hope we are not proud of the way in which we Allies have repaid our debt to Belgium. Do we realize, even now, what a debt we owe to her? When the war-cloud first appeared on the horizon, in 1913, the Belgians made a sacrifice to the idea of national independence which we have never made. Their Parliament decreed the principle of universal military service and provided the ways and means for doubling the Belgian Army. They are the most pacific, the most industrial of the Continental nations; but they were prepared to put for the future one-half of their able-bodied men into the field for national defence. The war broke upon them before the new regulations had produced anything like their full effect. But it is the simple truth that the resistance of the Belgians at Liège and before Brussels saved the situation for the Allies. The Germans entered Belgium on August 4. They had expected to march straight through Belgium to the French frontier. In fact they were prevented from reaching the frontier until the 23rd. No one knows the exact state of the French defences on that day; but we know this much, that on the left of the Allied armies, at the point where the Germans made their great effort to reach Paris by outflanking the Allies, the French Commander-in-Chief had staked everything on the power of the British troops to delay the German advance. As we know, Sir John French and his troops did what was expected, at the cost of incredible efforts and in spite of losses which

would have demoralized most armies. But if the Germans had reached Mons three days earlier, they would have found no British forces drawn across their road. Our troops reached Mons at the earliest date which had ever been expected ; but they only got into position on August 22, barely twenty-four hours before the Germans were upon them. But for the delay caused by the Belgian resistance, which was so fierce and so unexpected that it upset all the calculations of the enemy, it is hard to see how the Germans could have been kept out of Paris. The fall of Paris would not have ended the war ; but it would have prolonged the war—such is the expert opinion—perhaps by as much as two years. What two additional years of warfare on the present scale would have cost the Allies in human lives, one hardly dares to conjecture. But in money alone two years of war could not cost this country less than £700,000,000. Money is not the first or even the second consideration in a war like this. Yet, after all, money represents wealth, the material basis of civilization. Lacking wealth, we must forgo many of the goods of life which are absolutely essential to civilization, not to speak of comfort. Let us only try to imagine how we should be obliged to economize—as individuals and as a nation—to pay off £700,000,000. It would mean pinching and scraping, for at least a generation, on such items as our charities, our poor-relief, our hospitals, the education of our children. When we emerge from the present war we are likely to be pinched in any case. I hope we shall never forget how much worse the position might have been, if General Leman had not played the part of a hero at Liége, or if King Albert had consented to make his peace with the Germans while he was still at Brussels.

But, after all, the Belgians have not been fighting for our material advantage or their own. If they have allowed their own women and children to go hungry and ragged, they have not done so simply and solely that English women and children might still be well fed and warmly clothed. It is not for the safety of England or of France that thousands of the Belgian people have allowed themselves to be driven into exile. Belgium has made her unparalleled sacrifices for the sake of an ideal. While we are fighting to assert the rule of law, the Belgians are fighting for their rights as a nationality. Under German rule they would have been much better secured against aggression than they ever will be as an independent State; and it is highly probable that they would have been materially more prosperous. Antwerp might have become the maritime capital of the German Empire; at all events Belgian trade would have been protected and fostered by German armaments and German diplomacy. Belgium would probably have kept her own King and her own Parliament; she might have been admitted into the Empire on the same favourable terms as Saxony, or even as Bavaria. And the Belgian nation almost to a man have refused to consider these alluring prospects, as not worthy to be weighed for a moment against national honour and national freedom. The greatest debt which Europe owes to the Belgians is this: that, in an age which appeared to be wholly materialistic, in an age which has talked as though the highest end and object of government was to effect a right distribution of wealth, and as though a man's duty to his class or his party came before his duty to his nation, they have been ready to sacrifice all that they possess, and life itself, for the sake of their national freedom. A nation

of artisans and manufacturers, of merchants and of shopkeepers, of farmers and peasant proprietors, they have dared to assert the value of the ideal, and to fight for their ideal in the teeth of overwhelming odds. Whether they succeed or fail—and they will not fail until France and England and Russia are beaten and broken—they have at least given Europe a lesson and an example which Europe can never forget.

To think of Belgium as a national State had not occurred to many Englishmen before the present war. We knew that the old racial differences of Fleming and Walloon survived ; and that these two races, approximately equal in numbers, were acutely divided on political and on religious questions. We knew also that conflicts between Labour and Capital had been particularly virulent in Belgium up to the close of the nineteenth century ; and that Belgian socialists were at all events theoretically cosmopolitan in their outlook. We remembered the Belgian War of Independence in 1830–3; but we had the impression that the Fleming, and the Walloon, had been drawn together by no stronger ties than those of a common resentment against Dutch misrule. Some of us admired the great Belgian writers, Maeterlinck and Verhaeren ; a few of us were aware of the existence of a Belgian school of sculptors. Hardly any one realized that these writers and artists represented a national sentiment of considerable strength. We are wiser now. We have realized that a coherent nation may be formed out of different races ; that national patriotism may grow up in the midst of political and social controversies ; and that, even in the modern world, the men of the counting-house and of the factory may find the ultimate rule of their lives in the dreams of the study or the studio.

After all, though the Belgian nationality is a plant of recent growth, it is deeply rooted in the soil of Belgium. The Belgians are to-day the same people that they have been for centuries ; they have only changed since 1839 to this extent, that they have become more fully conscious of their individuality as a people, prouder of the great traditions by which they are united, more alive to the advantages of every kind which result from the union and the independence of the Belgian provinces. But the essential characteristics and aptitudes of the Belgians, the qualities which entitle them to an honourable place in the commonwealth of nations—these can be detected even in the remote past when the name of Belgium was unknown, even as a geographical expression, and when the soil of Belgium was divided between half a dozen feudal principalities. Then, as now, the Belgian, whether he was by race a Walloon or a Fleming, was, remarkable, first for his untiring, almost heroic industry, secondly for a fervid idealism which coloured his religion and his art and often found expression in the conduct of his life. By virtue of these qualities the Belgian people have made, in the course of the past fifteen hundred years, a very substantial contribution both to the economic development of Europe and to its higher civilization. The mediaeval history of Belgium brings home to us the antiquity and the far-reaching extent of the debt which Europe owes the Belgian nation of to-day. I should like to give some illustrations, not because the Belgians of to-day have any need to rely upon the merits of their ancestors for our respect, but because it is a pure pleasure to dwell on such a record of past services.

Do we realize, in the first place, how completely the marvellous edifice of European wealth and civilization

is founded upon the labours and the economies of the forgotten pioneers and squatters who, from prehistoric times down to the very end of the Middle Ages, were slowly manufacturing habitable and cultivable land out of tangled forests, out of muddy swamps, out of desert moors and wastes? Every square yard of soil which we employ to-day in Europe owes some of its value to these early agriculturists. And there is no country in Europe where this work was carried on with more zeal or under more difficult conditions than in the Belgian Netherlands. In the fourth century after Christ the northern part of this country, the plains of Flanders and of North Brabant, was composed of heaths and marshes and sand-dunes. By the fifteenth century this wilderness had become a land of populous cities, surrounded by a dense agricultural population. How it had been reclaimed you may see from the case of the Yser river basin, which the Belgian army is defending. The rich meadows, which the Belgians have flooded by cutting the sea-dykes, were reclaimed from the sea in the fourteenth century. The Yser dykes were almost the last of the great artificial works by which Flanders became prosperous. It is no wonder that Flemish peasants were in demand all over Europe when there was land to be reclaimed. Three districts in Germany—Schleswig-Holstein, the Alt-Mark of Brandenburg, and Silesia—are partly indebted to the Flemings for their present prosperity. But it is needless to insist that, irrespective of such migrations—and at one time they were very considerable—the agricultural development of Flanders inevitably benefited all the numerous states with which her population traded from the earliest days of Flemish history.

To-day, however, all European countries are or aspire

to be industrial communities; and they are impelled towards industrialism by the fact that their territories are too small for their population, if that population remains rooted to the soil and persists in an agricultural mode of life. Industrialism, like most great inventions of the past, seems to us now a very obvious way of maintaining a dense population. But the plan of producing wholly for the market, of sinking large stocks of capital in manufacturing enterprise, of searching out foreign markets and of clearing the road for foreign trade by means of commercial treaties—this was not rapidly or easily discovered. It was found out simultaneously by two European peoples, by the Italians and by the Flemings. But the Flemings made their first experiments in capitalistic industry under circumstances which were relatively unfavourable; and these experiments were the more valuable to Europe because they were admired and copied by those Northern nations—the English, the French, and the Germans—with whom lay the future of European industry. The Flemings discovered that their soil was particularly suited to sheep-breeding. They turned to the textile industries as a means of utilizing the fleeces of their sheep. Then they found that their cloth was in request all over Europe; and their weavers migrated from the open country into towns, to devote themselves entirely to cloth-making. Lastly, there grew up an aristocracy of merchants who became organizers of the industry, who imported wool from abroad to supplement the home-supply, who bought the finished cloth for export, who arranged for its transport, and who travelled far and wide in search of customers. Such was the trade which gave to the Flemish cities—particularly to Ghent and Ypres and Bruges—their marvellous pros-

perity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These cities were an unforgettable object-lesson to the statesmen of other nations.

But it was not their wealth alone which made the Flemish cities admirable. In the golden age of their development they were more than municipalities; they were states in miniature. Ghent and Bruges and Ypres ruled over considerable territories outside their walls. United they were strong enough to dictate terms to their lord, the Count of Flanders; and on one memorable field, at Courtrai in 1302, they gave a sound beating to the army of their overlord the King of France. How they were able to do it has been much discussed. Some say that they proved the superiority of the foot-soldier to the cavalryman; others that they owed the victory to the ditches which crossed the battle-field and made it impossible for the French knights to charge. The French themselves had no explanation to give; they could not understand it. One prefers to think that the Flemish burghers won because they had in them the temper which Oliver Cromwell declared—and he was no mean judge of such matters—to be the making of an efficient soldier. 'I had rather have a plain russet-coated man that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that which you call a gentleman and is nothing else.' The Flemings knew what they fought for; the independence of their native province, and still more the right to govern their native cities as they pleased, without the interference of either Count or King. Courtrai was won by an army of artisans and small employers; they fought to destroy the power of the narrow oligarchic coteries which had usurped the government of the towns; and they fought the King of France because he was on the side of their oppressors

The object, in fact, was to set up industrial democracies. It was only achieved in part and for a short time ; the Flemings were hard hit by the French at Cassel in 1328, and at Roosebecque in 1382. The second of these battles was the death-blow to Flemish liberties ; Flanders became the property of a French prince, and the nucleus of that powerful Burgundian State which, under the autocratic rule of Charles the Rash (1465–77), formed a menace to both France and Germany.

The catastrophe of 1382 destroyed Flemish independence for the next three centuries and a half. It did not destroy material prosperity, or prevent Flanders and the other Flemish province of North Brabant, which shared the same servitude, from remaining glorious as homes of art and culture. It definitely linked the fortunes of the Flemings to those of their Walloon neighbours in Hainault, in Namur, and in the Ardennes ; and to that extent the Burgundian supremacy prepared the way for the founders of the Belgian nation. But for the time being it destroyed something more valuable than it created. It destroyed the democratic ideals of the Flemish cities.

We must not exaggerate the results which this democratic movement had achieved. It was proving a failure some time before the French conquest ; for its leaders had attempted the impossible, and they were not consistently faithful to their own ideals. After the battle of Courtrai the craft-gilds of the cities got political power into their own hands ; they ousted the capitalist from the town-councils and the magistracies. But the craft-gilds did not really desire liberty and equal opportunities for all. Under their rule the weaving cities relentlessly stamped out the weaving trade in every village within reach. The members of the craft-

gilds, who were mostly employers on a small scale, made it illegal for those whom they employed to organize. And they discovered very soon that the rich merchants, although robbed of political power, were still masters of the economic situation. It was only through the merchants that the craftsman could obtain his raw materials or dispose of his finished product. Democracy had failed to produce the material advantages which were expected from it; and it fell out of favour when the first flush of enthusiasm for the new political creed had passed away. Democracy was indeed impracticable in a society of which the structure was essentially capitalist and aristocratic. Ghent and Bruges were no more fitted to be democracies than was the Republic of Venice, which rose to greatness and decayed contemporaneously with them. None the less is honour due to the Flemish burghers for a bold political experiment, which was all the more honourable to them because it anticipated by some centuries the natural course of social evolution. At all events they share with the Swiss cantons the credit for reviving the idea of political freedom when it was in danger of dying altogether. From the battles of Courtrai and Morgarten we may date the birth of the Third Estate as a factor in European politics.

This democratic movement of the fourteenth century illustrates one side, the political side, of Flemish idealism. It was a movement which was coloured and indeed disfigured by an intensely localized patriotism, which understood by freedom little more than the assertion of municipal independence, which made the citizen of Bruges or Ghent even more anxious to humble other Flemish cities than to reform his own. This local patriotism it was which made the Belgian Netherlands so defenceless against French and Austrian and Spanish

despotism. But such as it was, it gave some dignity and meaning to Belgian history in the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. The Flemish provinces were always prepared to take up arms in defence of local liberties. And we have seen of late the proof that, when the provinces were united under a government of their own choosing, this local patriotism was rapidly transmuted into a nobler sentiment of nationalism.

But there are other aspects of Flemish idealism which are better known, and to which Europe is more profoundly indebted. It is almost a commonplace with German writers on political science that the small states of the modern world are unlikely to do much for artistic or intellectual progress. It is a strange view to be held by the countrymen of Schiller and of Goethe. It is contradicted more emphatically by the history of Belgium than by that of Weimar. Weimar was for a single generation the focus of a great literary movement. The Flemings and the Walloons have been not once but several times conspicuous as the pioneers of religious revivals and of new artistic forms.

No doubt there was much spiritual indolence among the patriciates of the Flemish cities, these 'rich men, furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations', who were the patrons of Rubens and of Teniers, who lavished their money upon sumptuous mansions, on costly furniture and tapestries, who often spent more on their town-halls than their churches. But there was another temperament, the very antithesis of this complacent satisfaction in the best of all possible worlds, which meets us at every stage of Flemish history; a mystical temperament, which rebelled against the commonplace and the worship of material splendour, which found satisfaction in painful enterprises, in seclusion

and self-mortification, or in visions of the good and the beautiful. The Flemings and the Walloons were intimately associated with every religious revival of the Middle Ages; and nowhere did the urban classes give a more consistent or generous support to the founders of new religious houses. The *béguinage* for male or female recluses was a distinctive feature of the smallest Flemish towns; these communities were founded by burghers for men and women of their own class. If any one is inclined to make light of such communities, and of the religion which they fostered, he should read the *Imitatio Christi* attributed to Thomas à Kempis. It was produced in a Dutch community, but it expresses faithfully the best religious thought of the Belgian Netherlands. Besides the recluses, we must remember the popular preachers, and the crusaders, of whom both the Flemish and the Walloon provinces were prolific. A Walloon, Godfrey of Bouillon, was the first Latin king of Jerusalem. One count of Flanders (Baldwin IX) became the first ruler of the Latin Empire of Constantinople; another, Thierry of Alsace, made four several expeditions to the Holy Land. In the crusading movement, from its commencement almost to its close, the Flemings and the Walloons played a part which was out of all proportion to their numbers or their political importance.

For the fifteenth century, the age of the Renaissance, we have another sort of witnesses to attest the vitality of Flemish faith. The early Flemish school of painting, which reached the height of perfection in the works of the Van Eycks and of Hans Memling, is remarkable not only for rich colouring and the minute representation of detail, but still more for its profoundly religious spirit. These painters, we feel, delight in the forms and colours of the world around them; but they are chiefly preoccu-

pied with the problem how to make of the seen world a symbol which shall foreshadow and suggest the unseen. In Flanders and Brabant, as in Italy, the native schools of art and of religious thought were blighted during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries first by Spanish and afterwards by Austrian rule. Louvain and Antwerp became the head-quarters of an official Catholic propaganda which had its virtues, no doubt, but was Spanish, or Austrian or Italian, never Flemish in its character. Flemish art became denationalized in the same manner; a Rubens or a Vandyck worked for patrons of many nationalities and developed a cosmopolitan manner which, though certainly magnificent, had little or no relation to the Flemish mind. But, since 1870, in the national kingdom of Belgium, there has been a genuine revival of Flemish mysticism both in art and literature. In the writings of Maeterlinck, in the symbolic sculptors of the young Belgian school, we see the spirit of the *béguinage* and the spirit of Van Eyck, adapted indeed to modern forms of thought and expression, but substantially unchanged. Local traditions and racial characteristics have a truly astonishing power of persistence; and it would be a grave error to suppose that the modern Belgians are connected with their ancestors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries solely in the imagination of the poet or the antiquarian. The traditions, in particular, of the glorious past of the Netherlands have entered into the very life-blood of the Belgians. The Greeks and the Italians have shown us in the past how such traditions may lift up the hearts of a whole people, and nerve them for incredible renunciations. The Belgians are teaching us the same lesson by their example at the present day.

Europe owes it to Belgium, and owes it to herself, that such traditions, and the nation whom they have inspired, should not be allowed to become a memory of the past. The Belgians deserved well of Europe in the Middle Ages; but the Belgians of to-day have deserved still better. They have added another chapter to the long history of the brave deeds of small nations; such deeds are the greatest heritage that any men can leave to the future. It is more than two thousand years ago since three hundred Spartans faced and fought the innumerable armies of the Persians, and died to a man, that they might gain time for their countrymen behind them to prepare defences; more than two thousand years since the whole people of the Athenians took ship and sailed from Athens, saying that the barbarian might take away their homes, but should not take away their freedom. Those actions are as fresh in the minds of men as if they had happened yesterday. The Spartans in the pass of Thermopylae, the Athenians in their ships at Salamis, have been for seventy generations the symbols of heroic patriotism. But I think that future generations, without forgetting the Spartans or the Athenians, will quote the Belgians as a proof that the old standards of heroism and of patriotism have not altogether been forgotten in the modern world. We, who have seen this war, when we hear the name of patriot in the future, shall always think of the little war-worn Belgian army on the Yser; a ragged army, pinched with cold and drenched with rain, short of guns, short of ammunition, short of food; an army which has been pushed back by the brute weight of men and metal, till it stands on the very frontier of Belgium and has been obliged to let in the sea over the last few miles of Belgian territory that it controls; but an army

which is still unconquered and, as we firmly hope, unconquerable. Is there in the world at this moment another industrial democracy which would be able to endure this ordeal? We may think so, but we must hope with all our hearts that the belief will never be put to the hard test of facts. So far we have owed much, too much to Belgium. I doubt we shall never pay that debt in full; it is unpayable. And so it is with mingled shame and sympathy that we wish God-speed to King Albert and his brave Belgians on the Yser.

Oxford: Horace Hart Printer to the University

OXFORD PAMPHLETS 1914

I

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